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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAGHDAD 000224

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SUBJECT: IRAQ NATIONAL LIST MEMBERS WEIGH IN ON PROVINCIAL ELECTIONS, BLOC DISARRAY

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Classified By: Acting Political Counselor Timothy A. Lenderking for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

1.(C)Summary: Meetings with several current and former members of Ayad Allawi's Iraqi National List (INL) Council of Representatives (CoR) bloc reveal a movement in disarray, beset by petty differences and internal bickering. With provincial elections quickly approaching, the prospects for the INL remain unclear. Though some bloc members close to Allawi have offered outlandish predictions of success, other current and former bloc members are less optimistic. Once hailed as a secular, moderate alternative to the religious parties, the INL has found itself increasingly on the margins of Iraqi politics. Though Allawi still enjoys a fair degree of popularity among Iraqis, a poor showing in the upcoming provincial elections, which many are already predicting, could ultimately hasten the demise of the INL. End Summary.

A Bloc in Disarray, From Top to Bottom

¶2. (C) During a 1/14 meeting, INL CoR bloc leader Mehdi Hafith provided a scathing critique of Allawi. Hafith told Poloff that Allawi simply cannot accept his diminished role within the Iraqi political arena, and has subsequently placed the blame for his demise on the U.S., whom he feels abandoned him. Hafith claimed this was particularly evident during the security agreement debate in late-2008. According to Hafith, Allawi's opposition to the agreement had little to do with substance and was instead driven by his anger at the U.S. He further claimed that many in the INL actually supported the agreement from the very beginning, but Allawi directed his bloc to oppose the agreement, and even censured those who spoke out in favor of the agreement. Only after intense lobbying efforts by the U.S. and the GOI did Allawi come around, which Hafith claimed provided the egotistical Allawi with the attention and recognition he constantly demands.

¶3. (C) In discussing the bloc, Hafith told Poloff that it is really a collection of individuals with disparate and often competing agendas. Hafith criticized Allawi's leadership, stating that Allawi has created an environment in which the CoR bloc members often behave like children, competing for Allawi's attention while fighting among themselves. Hafith seemed particularly distressed that the INL has deviated from its secular, moderate principles. He also questioned Allawi's alliances with what he termed "distasteful" partners - notably the July 22 bloc (Fadhilah, Hewar, Sadr Trend, and other Sunni independents) - which he commented "have nothing in common with us." In addition, he said that Allawi's unwillingness to engage with the current government has been disastrous for the bloc. Though he claimed that there are many others in the bloc that are exhausted with Allawi's antics and the direction of the party, including the party's senior member, Adnan Pacchachi, they do not know how to move forward.

¶4. (C) These internal divisions were on vivid display during a 12/16 meeting with INL CoR members Osama Najafi, Hussam Azzawi, Khairallah al-Basri, Aliyah Obeidi, and Sheikh Jamal al-Shammari. The assembled bloc members spent much of the meeting bemoaning past grievances about the 2005 elections, alleging that Iran had stolen the past elections from the INL while expressing concern that the same could happen again in ¶2009. Suddenly and without warning, Basri launched into a profanity-laden rant about the failure of democracy in Iraq, asserting that the religious parties have all used the democratic system to consolidate their power and that there was no democracy in Iraq. He lambasted IHEC, claiming that the institution had been dominated by the religious parties, which drew Obeidi's assent. For this and other reasons, Basri said that he supported the single region project initiated by former Iraqiyyah member Wael Abd al-Latif and his cousin, Governor Wa'ili (Note: The organizers of the Basrah referendum project failed to obtain the necessary signatures - 10% of Basrah's registered voters - required to move the referendum process forward). This immediately drew a strong rebuke from Osama Najafi, who blasted Basri, claiming that the Kuwaitis and Saudis were using the lure of federalism as a means to dismember and weaken Iraq. Basri then responded by insulting Najafi, who stormed out of the room along with Hussam al-Azzawi. A visibly embarrassed Shammari then scolded Basri for his behavior, prompting him to walk out, muttering obscenities under his breath. Following Basri's departure, Najafi and Azzawi rejoined the meeting.

Provincial Elections: Delusions...

¶5. (C) In a 1/15 meeting, INL CoR member Hussam Azzawi outlandishly yet earnestly predicted that the INL would win 30-40% of the PC seats throughout the country - provided the

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Iranians do not interfere in the elections. Azzawi also claimed that Allawi had been greeted by enormous crowds in several campaign trips throughout Iraq. In a subsequent meeting on 1/20, INL CoR member and Allawi loyalist Falah Naqib made a similar assertion, claiming that Allawi's recent campaign trips have been highly successful and that Iraqiyyah could win 25-30% of the provincial council seats in Baghdad, Anbar, and Ninewah, as well a sizable number of seats in other provinces. Echoing Azzawi, he quickly qualified his projections by stating that Iranian interference in the elections could jeopardize the INL's success, likely providing himself with an out should the INL fail to achieve these lofty numbers. When asked by Poloff how they had formulated their assessments, both men said that their projections were based on internal INL polling, and Falah claimed that these numbers were supported by polls conducted by the Iraq Center for Strategic Studies (Note: An INR Office of Research poll, conducted in late-December 2008, reveals that the INL polled fairly well in several provinces, though not at the levels claimed by Azzawi and Naqib. However, a more recent poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute in January shows that overall, only 7% of the Iraqi electorate identified Iraqiyyah as their first choice at the polls. End Note).

...And Reality

¶6. (C) In a 1/15 meeting with Poloff, INL member Osama Najafi was less sanguine than Azzawi and Naqib, estimating that overall, the INL may get 10% of the vote in the provincial elections - "better in some, worse in others." He expressed more confidence in his own Nineva-based Hadba list, predicting that they could pick up several seats in the Nineva PC, and that the combined Sunni lists would win a majority of the seats in that province. Offering an even more realistic assessment of the INL's prospects, INL CoR member and Najaf native Radwan Killidar told Poloff on 1/15

that he was doubtful that the bloc would be able to pick up more than 5-10% of the vote in many of the southern provinces. Though he added that the INL may have a decent showing in Najaf's urban areas, he said that he still expected ISCI to win the election - and perhaps an outright majority - in Najaf. He freely admitted that in the south, the INL would be unable to counter ISCI's tremendous resources and organization, or Dawa's superior campaigning. Commenting on the race in Basrah, Killidar said that he expected a tight contest between ISCI and Dawa, but that the INL could emerge either third or fourth behind these two parties.

¶ 17. (C) Perhaps the bleakest assessment came from INL bloc leader Hafith, who had previously expressed confidence about his bloc's chances in a 12/11 conversation with Poloff. During a subsequent conversation with Poloff on 1/14, he was much more pessimistic. Discussing the INL's chances, Hafith claimed that Iraqiyyah would be lucky to garner between 5-10% of the vote in the majority of the provinces. Though there are some in the bloc who believe otherwise, he said that he simply doesn't see anything to support their optimism. In contrast to Azzawi and Naqib, Hafith said that Allawi had been less than successful on the campaign trail, and that he lacked the resources to run an effective campaign, let alone compete with ISCI and Dawa. Hafith also tipped his hat to the PM, stating that Dawa's State of Law coalition was running a strong campaign and attracting a large segment of the secular, moderate vote - people who would have likely voted Osecular, moderate vote - people who would have likely voted for the INL in the past.

Future Implications

¶ 18. (C) Hafith opined that if the INL performs as poorly as he thinks it will, there could be an exodus from the bloc prior to next year's national elections. Hamid Majid Mousa, the Communist bloc CoR leader who left the INL in 2007, was more pessimistic, telling Poloff on 1/15 that "Iraqiyyah (INL) was finished." On 1/21, former INL member and independent CoR member Safia Suhail echoed Hafith and Mousa's views, stating that the INL's likely poor showing in the provincial elections would hasten the bloc's demise. However, though Suhail said that she could believe Mehdi Hafith and some of the other party members may abandon the bloc for other parties, the majority will stay put, simply because "no one else wants them." Continuing, she said that though Allawi will "always have a seat at the table, because he knows how to look out for himself," the INL in its current form would probably cease to exist after next year's national elections.

¶ 19. (C) Comment: Though a poor showing in the upcoming provincial elections may lead to defections from the party in

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the run-up to the national elections, it is likely that internal differences, as well as frustration with the bloc leader, Ayad Allawi, may likely be more of a contributing factor. Moreover, though several current and former bloc members are pessimistic about the bloc's chances in the provincial elections, even a 10% showing in some provinces could put the INL in an enviable position as post-election coalition building begins in earnest. Given the delusions of grandeur that some in the bloc continue to hold, it remains to be seen whether the bloc will accept the results as an accurate barometer of the bloc's 2009 position and move forward, or simply remain in denial and offer up another four years' worth of excuses and recriminations. End Comment.

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